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Clement of Alexandria's Attitude towards the Greek Philosophy

Abstract: Clement of Alexandria, who lived in the 2nd and 3rd century AD, described the Christian experience by means of Greek philosophy which he knew very well. In the *Stromata* he discussed the issue of the relation between philosophy and the Truth. The Holy Scripture and classical texts being his point of departure, he does not reject philosophy and he admits that it may lead to Wisdom.

Key words: Clement of Alexandria, Christianity, Greek philosophy, *Stromata*

Christianity did not arrive out of nowhere. Quite on the contrary, it came into being in a specific place and time and was influenced by both of these factors. No wonder then that, considering changing culture, it had to (and still has to) undergo revision, which is part of its nature and which results from circumstances. It is just against the background of cultural changes that such necessity becomes even more evident. It cannot be denied that there is a significant difference between Palestinian villages somewhere on the outskirts of the Empire and Rome or Alexandria. Hence the Christians, dispersed in various parts of the world, had to constantly reflect upon their relation to it. One of the first thinkers to examine the question in a systematic way was Clement of Alexandria.

Little is actually known of his life. Clement was probably born in Athens c. 150 AD. He undertook numerous journeys through Asia Minor and Syria to Italy and Egypt until he eventually settled in Alexandria where he chose to study

under Pantaenus.¹ However, it is not only his teachers (Pantaenus being sixth in a row!) that exerted influence upon him. What was also very important was the situation of Alexandria, an affluent city marked not only by various religions and cults present there but also by doctrinal and literary trends.²

The considerable impact of the city of Alexandria on Clement can be observed in his writings. The *Protrepticus* was intended to persuade the readers to follow the Christian faith. In its style it resembles philosophical admonishing speeches, nevertheless – although between the 2nd and the 4th century AD many apologies were written – Clement's style is considered excellent.³ He makes reference to the cultural heritage of his time both in the style and the content. Clement endeavours to incline the reader to listen to the song of the new Orpheus about the Logos (where both the performer and the subject matter of the song reflect Christ) instead of mythical songs in honour of past gods. He recognizes the value of philosophical teaching as well as its potential to discover the truth. In his opinion, however, the true knowledge is accessible only to prophets, and ultimately in the Logos itself.⁴

Another writing, *Paedagogus*, addressed to Christians, is concerned with social and moral issues. The author describes some practical issues, such as celebrations, furnishing of a house, behaviour during meals or towards persons of the opposite sex, clothes, shoes and cosmetics. He does not aim to create a catalogue of ascetic commandments, though. It is evident that Clement tries to show that moral requirements of the Logos correspond to the rational nature of the man. He gives both biblical and philosophical arguments for that but he does not present them as being in opposition. Again, the ultimate argument is the provenance of the truth from the Logos, independently of where this truth is discovered.

However, it is only the third work, entitled *Stromata*, that contains Clement's standpoint on the relation between philosophy and Truth. It is not a systematic, classical argument but its structure results from the form of the entire text adopted by the author. The *Stromata* is a collection of freely-collated notes. The author's intention was that they should only inspire, suggest associations and allusions, leading an attentive reader to reason and draw his own (and only proper!) conclusions.⁵ A sense of mystery and indirect proclamation of the truth are crucial in Clement's writing:

¹ Cf. H. von Campenhausen: *The Fathers of the Greek Church*. New York 1959, p. 30.

² Cf. J. Niemirska-Pliszczyńska: "Wstęp." In: Klemens Aleksandryjski: *Kobierce zapisków filozoficznych dotyczących prawdziwej wiedzy*. Ed. Eadem. Warszawa 1994, p. VIII–X.

³ H. von Campenhausen quotes E. Norden (*Die antike Kunstprosa*. Leipzig 11898, p. 549) who wrote that the preface to *Protrepticus* "is among the most subtle productions of Sophist prose." Cf. H. von Campenhausen: *The Fathers of the Greek Church...*, pp. 31–32.

⁴ Cf. H. von Campenhausen: *The Fathers of the Greek Church...*, p. 32.

⁵ Cf. J. Niemirska-Pliszczyńska: "Wstęp"..., p. XIV.

The *Stromata* will contain the truth mixed up in the dogmas of philosophy, or rather covered over and hidden, as the edible part of the nut in the shell. For, in my opinion, it is fitting that the seeds of truth be kept for the husbandmen of faith, and no others.⁶

For I do not mention that the *Stromata*, forming a body of varied erudition, wish artfully to conceal the seeds of knowledge.⁷

Thus it becomes clear that Clement wants to reveal the Truth only to few ones who have the knowledge: "the husbandmen of faith" are Christians. However, because of the Truth being purposely mixed up with philosophical theories, Clement expects from his readers not only the knowledge of the Holy Scripture but also of these very theories – how could they manage to tell the nut from the shell otherwise?

The reference to gnosis, already noticeable here, is not surprising, though it may bring to mind gnostic heresies fought by Christianity. In fact, the question of gnosis occupies a central place in the *Stromata*.⁸ According to Clement, however, it is Christianity that is true gnosis (as opposed to wrongful trends of gnosticism) and a Christian is really a gnostic that strives to know God.

The *Stromata* is divided into seven books, according to the subject matter discussed by the author.⁹ The first one was given the title "On relations between philosophy and the Christian faith." Then Clement goes on to speak about faith and the purpose of human life (II), marriage (III), martyrdom and gnostic perfection (IV), knowledge of God and symbolism (V), and finally philosophy and human knowledge which prepared true gnosis (VI), as well as a model of a true gnostic (VII). Clement's attitude towards Greek culture is expressed mainly in the first book.

The author starts with the statement that the knowledge of Greek philosophy is needed to be able to at least demonstrate its uselessness. One cannot criticize something not knowing it and in order to prove that it is unnecessary one has to philosophize.¹⁰ Moreover, the very effort of cognition is worth appreciation and respect.¹¹ Philosophy gives a great opportunity to exercise the intellect, too.¹² Clement met the condition of knowing philosophy and literature perfectly. In his reasoning he always uses two types of authority: the first is that

⁶ *Strom.*, I, 1 [according to: *Ante-Nicene Fathers. The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson. Grand Rapids 1956, which has different numbering, that is *Strom.*, I, 2.]

⁷ *Strom.*, I 20, 4 [*Strom.*, I, 2].

⁸ Cf. J. Niemirska-Pliszczyńska: "Wstęp," p. XXI.

⁹ Cf. Eadem, p. XVI.

¹⁰ Cf. D.I. Rankin: *From Clement to Origen. The Social and Historical Context of the Church Fathers*. Aldershot 2006, p. 130.

¹¹ *Strom.*, I, 19, 2–3.

¹² *Strom.*, I, 33, 1–3.

of the Scripture and the second – that of Greek classical works from Homer to Plato.¹³

One point that reverberates throughout the whole text is an instrumental role of philosophy for the cognition of the Truth.¹⁴ According to Clement, this is the same truth that can be found in Christ who said: “I am the Truth” (Joh 14:7).¹⁵ And just because it is impossible to know the Truth only by means of faith, what is still needed is science: as the Scripture can explain a lot, what is necessary is the ability to read it in order to understand it.¹⁶

Clement emphasizes the role of philosophy.¹⁷ In his opinion it led the Hellenes to the fear of God and His justice. It was a sort of preparation to faith for them.¹⁸ Like the Hebrews were given the Old Testament, philosophy was given to the Hellenes.¹⁹ Thus philosophy should be regarded as a gift of God, though its origin is uncertain. It undoubtedly derives from the same Wisdom as the Scripture but it is not perfect. Clement sees the source of such imperfection in the way in which the Greeks created philosophy. He exemplifies it with the theory of “theft committed by the Greeks” (put forward even earlier in the Judaic literature), according to which philosophers accepted everything that was in agreement with the Truth from the Scripture but they mixed it with highly questionable statements.²⁰ In this manner Clement puts together the achievements of the Greeks and Christianity, pointing out that their origin and development reflect the divine economy and the divine project of salvation.²¹ Niemirska-Pliszczyńska stresses the fact that wherever Clement speaks about leading the Hellenes to Christianity, he uses the word *propaideia*, by which he means pre-

¹³ Cf. L. Rzodkiewicz: *Jezus Chrystus w kulturze antycznej. Stanowisko Klemensa Aleksandryjskiego*. Legnica 1999, pp. 39–40.

¹⁴ *Strom.*, I, 20, 3.

¹⁵ *Strom.*, I, 32, 4.

¹⁶ *Strom.*, I, 35, 2. Cf. L. Rzodkiewicz: *Jezus Chrystus w kulturze antycznej...*, p. 97.

¹⁷ “Per Clemente, la tradizione filosofica greca è, al pari della legge per gli ebrei, ambito di rivelazione, sia pure imperfetta, del Logos, che ha permesso all’uomo di raggiungere alcuni spunti di verità, che Clemente può rivendicare al cristianesimo una volta depurati degli elementi non compatibili con esso. Ancora di più, questa tradizione è condizione per la costruzione dell’edificio dottrinale cristiano, che egli non esita a definire come la forma suprema di filosofia, che a sua volta, grazie alla tradizione esoterica e alla contemplazione dei misteri, trascende nella gnosi. Lo specifico apporto delle discipline filosofiche greche alla teologia cristiana consiste nell’assunzione dei loro contenuti come „chiavi” per l’ermeneutica allegorica della Scrittura, grazie a cui è possibile trascenderne la lettera per giungere al senso più vero e profondo.” Cf. M. Rizzi: “La scuola alessandrina: da Clemente a Origene.” In: *Storia della teologia I. Dalle origini a Bernardo di Chiaravalle*. Ed: E. dal Covolo, Roma–Bologna 1995, p. 89.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Simon: *Cywilizacja wczesnego chrześcijaństwa*. Warszawa ³1999, pp. 181–182.

¹⁹ *Strom.*, I, 28, 1–3.

²⁰ Cf. H. Crouzel: “Szkoła aleksandryjska i jej losy.” In: *Historia Teologii I. Epoka patrystyczna*. Ed. A. di Berardino, B. Studer. Kraków 2010, p. 199.

²¹ Cf. J. Niemirska-Pliszczyńska: “Wstęp”..., p. XXVI.

liminary preparation, whereas *paideia* is for him not the Greek culture but the Christian tradition.²²

Clement is not only conscious that there exist other philosophical schools. Indeed, as a theologian he is principally an exegete. However, he does go beyond the Scripture. He tries to understand ideas presented by different philosophers and to enter into dialogue with them.²³ What is most important for him is seeking the Truth: it can be found everywhere because it has one source – God.²⁴

Finally, in disputes with his opponents (to which we will come back later), Clement cleverly reduces their arguments to absurdity. When they claim that the Hellenes' wisdom has come by chance, Clement points to God as the author of such chance. When they say that the Hellenes possess only the natural intellect, he shows the nature's only Creator. Eventually, when they stress the imperfections of philosophical knowledge, Clement, by making reference to the Scripture, shows that this is a feature of any human cognition: "For now we see through a glass, darkly."²⁵ After all, arguments from the Scripture have a significant place in the *Stromata*:

And if any should violently say that the reference is to the Hellenic culture, when it is said, "Give not heed to an evil woman; for honey drops from the lips of a harlot," let him hear what follows: "who lubricates thy throat for the time."²⁶

And when He says, "Be not much with a strange woman," He admonishes us to use indeed, but not to linger and spend time with, secular culture.²⁷

Even though Clement makes reference to philosophical or literary works with great ease, when confronting those who put in question, by means of the Scripture, the sense of knowing the Greek philosophy, he uses their own way of reasoning. Rejecting the arguments from the Scripture that it is not worth devoting time to philosophy, Clement applies the same type of argumentation to prove that "for what was bestowed on each generation advantageously, and at seasonable times, is a preliminary training for the word of the Lord."²⁸ It is still necessary to explain the term "opponents." On the one hand, these are sophists, criticized by Clement for using philosophy to gain fame and money and, consequently, for paying more attention to the form than to the content.²⁹ On the other hand, the opponents were

²² Cf. Eadem, p. XXIV.

²³ Cf. H. Chadwick: *Mysł wczesnochrześcijańska a tradycja klasyczna*. Poznań 2000, p. 47.

²⁴ Cf. H. von Campenhausen: *The Fathers of the Greek Church...*, p. 35.

²⁵ *Strom.*, I, 94, 1–7. Quoting here 1 Co 13:12.

²⁶ *Strom.*, I, 29, 7 [*Strom.* I, 5], quoting Pro 5:5.8.

²⁷ *Strom.*, I, 29, 9 [*Strom.* I, 5].

²⁸ *Strom.*, I, 29, 10 [*Strom.* I, 5].

²⁹ Cf. H. Crouzel: "Szkoła aleksandryjska i jej losy...", p. 199.

also Christians. Clement was the first author to give a systematic and positive account of the relation of Christianity to the Greek culture.³⁰ It is no wonder, therefore, that he met resistance on the part of those who were reluctant to anything pagan. They claimed that philosophy, originating from paganism, was evil and consideration should be given to the faith alone, no rational understanding should be sought.³¹ Traces of such disputes can be found in the *Stromata*. On the one hand, Clement tends to speak about philosophy not very favourably and advise others against it, pointing out that not everything (like in the example with the nut) can be eaten. On the other hand, while expressing his final opinion, he writes:

And if, for the sake of those who are fond of fault-finding, we must draw a distinction, by saying that philosophy is a concurrent and cooperating cause of true apprehension, being the search for truth, then we shall avow it to be a preparatory training for the enlightened man; not assigning as the cause that which is but the joint-cause; nor as the upholding cause, what is merely co-operative; nor giving to philosophy the place of a *sine qua non*. Since almost all of us, without training in arts and sciences, and the Hellenic philosophy, and some even without learning at all, through the influence of a philosophy divine and barbarous, and by power, have through faith received the word concerning God, trained by self-operating wisdom.³²

Philosophy treated as “the seeking of the Truth” is therefore a method rather than a set of statements. It is a way that helps to understand Wisdom. Indeed, one can dispense with it but only when more profound knowledge comes from the faith.³³ There remains a question: to what extent Clement’s apparently inconsistent standpoint is meant, in the *Stromata*, to serve his intention of revealing the Truth only to few, forcing them to make efforts of breaking through allusions and mystery.

Summing up, Clement does not reject his Greek education. He uses it to bring the Hellenes and the Christians closer to each other. However, his aim is neither to Christianize the Hellenes nor to hellenize the Christians. His goal is to help the Greeks understand Wisdom and come to the Truth which they seek through philosophy.

³⁰ Tertullian, who lived in Clements times but wrote in Latin – although he received classical education (as a rhetor) – decidedly opposed the idea that the Greek culture could be useful for a believer. Cf. L. Rzodkiewicz: *Jezus Chrystus w kulturze antycznej...*, p. 35.

³¹ Cf. H. Crouzel: “Szkoła aleksandryjska i jej losy...,” p. 199.

³² *Strom.*, I, 99, 1 [*Strom.* I, 20].

³³ Cf. H. Crouzel: “Szkoła aleksandryjska i jej losy...,” p. 201.